

The Rival Poet

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It is a feature often seen in Shakespeare's Sonnets but rarely observed that the poet is more apt to address his subject as *thou* than to use the alternative form of *you*. Because past commentators have ploughed the wrong field when seeking to dig up reliable facts concerning Shakespeare's literary connections, they have never been able to discover either the identity of the rival poet, or for that matter the poetry which caused the rivalry in the first place. A little attention to the different forms of address in Elizabethan England would have shed light upon the problem.

In Old English, *thou* was singular and *you* was plural; but during the thirteenth century, *you* started to be used as a polite form of the singular – probably because people copied the French way of talking, where *vous* was used in that way. English then became like French, which has *tu* and *vous* both possible for singulars. So in early Modern English, when Shakespeare was writing, there was a choice: (Crystal, 13).

<i>Opener</i>	<i>Situation</i>	<i>Normal reply</i>
you	upper classes talking to each other, even when closely related	you
thou	special intimacy, such as <ul style="list-style-type: none">• talking to a lover	thou

There was no opener for an inferior addressing a superior. This was because an inferior addressed a superior as *your lordship*, or *your honour*; see the letters that prefix *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*. Only after this courtesy had been performed would it then be appropriate to use 'you'. This said: attention can be focussed upon the poet's use of *you*. According to the opener in the situation described above, Shakespeare was a member of the upper class and he was addressing a person of the same class, although not necessarily always the same person. The context of the sonnet provides the clues as to which member of the nobility it was intended for. The answer to the rival poet therefore lies with the nobility. But first, it is necessary to dismiss Sonnet 79, which uses *thou* and also speaks of rivalry. In this particular case, it is noted that the poet was addressing the so-called *fair youth*, whom he called, "*sweet love*". This would appear to come under 'special intimacy, such as talking to a lover' (see above).

Whilst I alone did call upon thy aid,
My verse alone had all thy gentle grace;
But now my gracious numbers are decay'd,
And my sick Muse doth give another place.
I grant, sweet love, thy lovely argument
Deserves the travail of a worthier pen;
...

Thomas Nashe dedicated *The Choice of Valentines* to the 3rd Earl of Southampton in late 1593. The work was inspired by *Venus and Adonis*, but more sexually explicit; this may have been why it remained unpublished until much later. In the same year, Barnabe Barnes dedicated a sonnet to Southampton. Nashe then sought better success with *The Unfortunate Traveller*, (1594), which he also dedicated to the Earl, declaring it to be, "*a cleane different vaine from other my former courses of writing.*" (Drabble, 687).

[Southampton] was early the patron of all scholars; the excellent Chapman calls him in his Iliad 'the choice of all our country's noblest spirits;' Nash, in speaking of him, says: 'Incomprehensible is the height of his spirit, both in heroical resolution and matters of conceit.' Beaumont asks, who lives on England's stage and knows him not? All poets and writers vied with each other in dedicating their works to him. (Gervinus, 446)

This presumably was the reason behind the composition of Sonnet 78, which precedes the one above.

So oft have I invok'd thee for my Muse,
And found such fair assistance in my verse,
As every alien pen has got my use,
And under thee their poesy disperse.

...

Shakespeare was talking about rival poets in the plural. He also continued to address the youth as *thee*. However, when Shakespeare used *you*, the alternate form of the second person singular, he need no longer have been talking to the *fair youth*, as we shall discover.

After Oxford's return from Italy, he turned his knowledge into good effect by attending to the Queen's entertainment at Court. The sudden appearance of so many anonymous plays that became identified as those by Shakespeare during the 1590s, many reflecting life in renaissance Italy, is indicative of their composition by Oxford after his return. *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of a Shrew*, *King Lear*, and *Hamlet*, which appear as entries in Henslowe's daybook dated 1594, support this inference, as well as *The Comedy of Errors*, *Henry V*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *Twelfth Night*.

It was in the midst of this early period of creativity that a new poet appeared at Court; this was Walter Raleigh. Sir Robert Naunton (1563-1635) observed the effect this had upon the Queen:

True it is, he had gotten the Queen's ear in a trice, and she began to be taken with his elocution, and loved to hear his reasons to her demands. And the truth is, she took him for a kind of oracle, which nettled them all. (Williams, 49)

To add to the Queen's delight with Raleigh, he began plying her with poetry.

Now we have present made
To Cynthia, Phoebe, Flora,
Diana and Aurora,
Beauty that cannot fade.

...

So her celestial frame
And quintessential mind,
Which heavens together bind,
Shall ever be the same.

Then to her servants leave her,
Love, nature and perfection,
Princess of world's affection,
Our praises but deceive her.

In another poem, Raleigh confided: "*In heaven Queen she is among the spheres:*" and in another: "*Those eyes that hold the hand of every heart,*" and in yet another: "*Those eyes which set my fancy on a fire.*" To these laudations, he added: "*Praised be Diana's fair and harmless light,*" followed by "*Wrong not, dear Empress of my heart, / The merit of true passion*". And the Queen loved it.

This affectionate display of words was quickly recognized by watchers at Court as an attempt by Raleigh to play court to Elizabeth. Indeed, his ambitious enterprise even found its way into Spenser's *Faerie Queen* (Book III canto 5; Book IV canto 7). There, he is portrayed as *Timias*, the lowborn squire who loves *Belphoebe*: a thin disguise for Elizabeth in her virginal role.

It was at this time that Raleigh completed a long sequence of verses entitled: *The Ocean's Love to Cynthia*, which he addressed to Elizabeth. In fact, her nickname for Raleigh was "*Water*", and since she was his "*Cynthia*", the title speaks for itself.

Oxford, as with other members at Court, could not help but be aware of Elizabeth's new favourite and the love Raleigh was expressing in his poetic overtures addressed to her, for he admitted as much in Sonnet 80. Note, therefore, how he addresses the Queen directly as *you*: as one member of the upper class would address another.

O, how I faint when I of you do write,
Knowing a better spirit doth use your name
And in the praise thereof spends all his might
To make me tongue-tied, speaking of your fame!
But since your worth, wide as the ocean is,
The humble as the proudest sail doth bear,
My saucy bark, inferior far to his,
On your broad main doth wilfully appear,
Your shallowest help will hold me up afloat,
Whilst he upon your soundless deep doth ride;
Or, being wreck'd, I am a worthless boat,
He of tall building and of goodly pride. ...

The poem is flooded with allusions to the sea, and by inference to Raleigh: he having identified himself with *the Ocean* in his love for *Cynthia of the Sea*.

Reference to the rival poet's superior ship also appears in the poem, as confirmed by the 800-ton *Ark Raleigh*, launched at Deptford in June 1587. The vessel was subsequently sold to the Queen for £5000 to become the first *Ark Royal*. Oxford's own ship, the *Edward Bonaventure*—his *saucy bark*—was inferior in build, and less expensive, as he admitted in the sonnet.

Oxford then refers to his rival's *tall building*. Raleigh had tried several times to get possession of Sherborne Castle in Dorset, with its impressive, four, huge, Norman towers. He had wanted to make this his family home, but it was not until 1592 that Elizabeth was able to acquire it for him as a present. In return, Raleigh became her new Admiral, "*in full command of an expedition of thirteen ships to attack the silver fleet and sack Panama.*" (Williams, 106).

Shakespeare's rival poet, we are told, was also a man of *goodly pride*. John Aubrey, in *Brief Lives* ascribed this same word to Raleigh: "*His naeve was that he was damnably proud.*" (ibid, 73). It was a sentiment expressed, too, by an anonymous epigram writer: "*Raleigh doth time bestride ... For all his bloody pride.*" Charles Cavendish, in a letter written to the Countess of Shrewsbury, was another who remarked upon Raleigh's pride (ibid, 79). A similar accusation was made by the correspondent, known only as "*A. B.*". In a letter of protest written to Lord Burghley (7 July 1586), he maintained: "*His pride is intolerable, without regard to any, as the world knows ...*" (ibid 70).

In the same verse, Oxford also managed to compare his current low estate with that of his rival. In this, he would have had in mind the aid he received from the Queen six years earlier, when she had given him an annuity of £1000 to add to her gift of the Manor of Rysing in Norfolk. *Your shallowest help will hold me up afloat*, he wrote.

Raleigh, by comparison, fared very much better. Apart from Sherborne Castle, a knighthood in 1584, several leases from All Souls College at Oxford, and a monopoly on wine, he was also given the lease of a manor formerly owned by the Bishop of Bath and Wells, and appointed, firstly, Lord Warden of the Stannaries, and secondly, Vice-Admiral of Cornwall and Devon. This joint position made him the most powerful man in the west of England, with charge over the lucrative tin industry and control of both the army and navy in Cornwall. In addition he also held the licence to export cloth. In Ireland he received 42,000 acres of land in Cork and Waterford: previously the property of the Earl of Desmond; and to this bounty were added the land and manors of the Babington Estate in the Midlands. As Oxford acknowledged – *Whilst he upon your soundless deep doth ride*.

The Ocean's Love for Cynthia is now lost, which may have something to do with its author having impregnated Elizabeth Throgmorton, while perhaps dreaming of a different Elizabeth. The Queen was understandably not impressed. Raleigh did the honourable thing, eventually, and married the pregnant Bess. And for his deceitful protestations of love for Cynthia, Cynthia sent him and his wife to the Tower. "*Ma sœur s'en alla à la Tour, et Sir W. Raleigh.*" (Williams, 109).

The Queen's reaction to the loss of Raleigh's attention was to turn to Oxford, demanding from him the reason why he had remained silent for so long, thus allowing Raleigh to gain such a huge advantage in her affections. Her complaint echoed that made by Edmund Spenser in *Tears of the Muses* - "*Our pleasant Willy, ah! is dead of late.*" Spenser's poem was published in the same year as *The Faerie Queen*, which parodied Raleigh's *amour* for Elizabeth. Spenser then complained that Willy, "*from whose Pen / Large Streams of Honey and sweet Nectar flow,*" ... "*Doth rather choose to sit in idle Cell.*" Oxford's awakening at the Queen's rebuke, if not Spenser's protest, may be judged by the sonnets he wrote referring to his rival at Court, and which, as dignity required, continue to address Queen Elizabeth as *you*.

...
 I found, or thought I found, you did exceed
 The barren tender of a poet's debt;
 And therefore have I slept in your report
 That you yourself, being extant, well might show
 How far a modern quill doth come too short,
 Speaking of worth, what worth in you do grow.
 This silence for my sin you did impute,
 Which shall be most my glory, being dumb;
 For I impair not beauty, being mute,
 When others would give life, and bring a tomb.
 There lives more life in one of your fair eyes
 Than both your poets can in praise devise. (83)

Raleigh, it will be recalled, had written several poems in praise of the Queen's eyes. Oxford's response was an attempt to exceed his rival in disseminating praise. The opening two lines to this sonnet are also revealing. They begin: "*I never saw that you did painting need, / And therefore to your fair no painting set*". Elizabeth was noted for her daily application of face paint: "*Her face paint was a mixture of white-of-egg, powdered egg-shell, alum, borax and poppy-seeds moistened with mill water.*" (Williams, 1972, 197)

Needless to say, the thought of Will Shakspeare referring to the Queen's personal use of cosmetics is too ludicrous to even contemplate. It is also noteworthy that Oxford has used the words, *you yourself*. This appears to hark back to the speech made by Elizabeth at Tilbury, when she appeared there on horseback to rally her troops in preparation for the arrival of Spain's armada.

I know I have only the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and courage of a king, and even of a king of England, and think foul scorn that Parma, or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare invade the border of my realms; to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field. (Montague, vol. ii: 68).

For the Queen to repeatedly refer to herself as *I myself* was at that time a novel form of expression. Did Oxford write her speeches, one wonders? In any case, Oxford's reference to *you yourself* captures the subjectivity of the Queen's reference to herself at Tilbury, by making it objective.

Shortly before his disgrace, Raleigh had sailed from England to lead a fleet of thirteen ships; his purpose was to intercept a silver fleet and to sack Panama. But during the voyage he heard from a Spanish informer that no treasure ships were to sail that year, he therefore ordered Martin Frobisher to alter course and intercept Portuguese carracks returning from the East Indies. He then turned his own ship about and returned to London. It was therefore left to Sir John Burroughs in the *Roebuck*, although still under Raleigh's command, to seize one of the prize vessels making for the Iberian coast. This was the *Madre de Dios*, which was escorted under arms into the port at Dartmouth.

She was the largest ship that had ever entered an English port, seven decks high, the most valuable single prize ever taken, with 537 tons of pepper, cloves, cinnamon, cochineal, mace and nutmegs, and as well jewels, gold ebony, carpets and oriental silks. (Williams, 113)

The crewmen who boarded it had immediately begun stuffing their pockets, and the pillaging resumed when the ship reached Dartmouth harbour. The lure of spices and gems attracted merchants, jewellers and goldsmiths, who descended on the port to purchase plunder from sailors at a bargain ... The queen claimed as her share ... far more than her actual investment. Some of what she garnered came at Raleigh's expense, who though nominally entitled to at least two-thirds of the loot, had to settle for about one fourth. (Jones, 144)

The reason for Elizabeth's indifference to Raleigh was because she had by then discovered his secret marriage. As punishment for deceiving her, she confined him first to Durham House, and then to the Tower. Oxford's response to this sudden downfall of his rival at Court is remarkably apt, and not without a few of those poisonous barbs for which he was noted. Observe too, his use of *you* when addressing the Queen.

Was it the proud full sail of his great verse,
Bound for the prize of all-too-precious you. (86)

In the opening line, Raleigh's *pride* is again mentioned: coupled, firstly, with his *full sail*; apt enough, since he was a seaman, privateer, and latterly Admiral of the fleet. Secondly, there is the remark about his *great verse*: his lengthy declaration in poetry for the love he felt for Elizabeth, which is contained in the *Ocean's Love for Cynthia*.

In the second line Shakespeare draws upon the capture of the prize ship, *Madre de Dios* for a further allegory. In this, the Queen is the precious prize and Raleigh is the nautical versifier windward bound to make the capture.

The sonnet then resumes with the reason for Oxford's silence.

That did my ripe thoughts in my brain inhearse,
Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?

By these words he continues to excuse himself for his recent silence, offering several possible explanations. His thoughts, he admits, were enclosed as in a tomb. But now, with Raleigh in prison, the tomb inside his brain has become a womb, wherein new thoughts are able to develop. Note, especially, that Oxford has coined his own word for this recent burial: it is *inhearse*. One does not have to look far for the reason. In Raleigh's postscript to *The Ocean's Love to Cynthia*, written while in prison, these lines occur:

But my loue's wounds, my fancy in the hearse,
The Idea but restinge, of a wasted minde, (Latham, 25).

Raleigh's *fancy*; that is, his mental imagery, like Oxford's thoughts, lay *in the hearse*, entombed, or as the sonneteer coined his new verb: *inhearse*. One might pass this off as coincidence, except that Oxford has deliberately drawn upon his rival's own expression for a similar entombment. Further allusions to Raleigh follow as the sonnet progresses.

Was it his spirit, by spirits taught to write
Above a mortal pitch, that struck me dead?

Oxford once again questions his recent silence, but now with a note of sarcasm. Raleigh was known to have been conducting séances at Durham House, hence the reference to *spirits*. As historian, Norman Williams remarked: "It is widely held that a free-speculating group around Raleigh was known by the name of 'the School of Night'." (Williams, 115 f.n.)

In 1592, a pamphleteer referred to this assemblage of persons as, "Sir Walter Rauley's Schoole of Atheisme." Chapman even composed a poem, *The Shadow of Night*, to honour the circle of

mathematicians and philosophers who attended Raleigh's meetings. The poem was entered in the Stationers' Register in December 1593 and published the following year.

By 1593, Raleigh's nocturnal activities had come under the surveillance of Lord Burghley —

... he was looking askance at the activities of a loose club or gathering of scientists, mathematicians, astrologers, astronomers and writers, who met under the joint aegis of Sir Walter Raleigh, and Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, nicknamed "the Wizard Earl". It was known as the School of Night. (Cook, 64)

Robert Parsons, an Oxford University educated Jesuit, living in exile in Augsburg, was aware of Raleigh's occult practices. "*Certainly if the school of atheism of Sir Walter Raleigh flourishes a little longer—which he is well known to hold in his house, with a certain necromantic astrologer as teach.*" (Cook, 105). Parsons went on to voice his fear that Raleigh might be appointed to the Council, where he could be influenced to draw up "*a proclamation by that Magus and Epicurus, Raleigh's teacher, and [get it] published in the name of the Queen*" (ibid).

As the sonnet continues, Oxford refers again to his recent silence, but now, with an air of defiance, he delivers a stinging blow at his rival, and to what Parsons called Raleigh's *Magus and Epicurus*.

No, neither he, nor his compeers by night
Giving him aid, my verse astonished.
He, nor that affable familiar ghost
Which nightly gulls him with intelligence,
As victors, of my silence cannot boast:

Amongst Raleigh's *compeers* were the mathematicians, Thomas Harriot, Walter Warner and Thomas Hughes. Marlowe, Chapman, and the minor poet Matthew Roydon also attended. It was later revealed that —

Marlowe had boasted he had 'read the atheist lecture to Sir Walter Raleigh and others', and had said 'that Moses was but a juggler, that one Harriot, being Sir Walter Raleigh's man, can do more than he.' (Cook, 118-19).

Sonnet 86 reveals how well informed Oxford was regarding the spiritualist practices that were taking place inside Durham House. The *familiar ghost*, for example, would be what is now called a spirit guide, but in earlier language was called a *familiar*.

It can be seen from this how sceptical Oxford was towards the séances held by Raleigh at his School of Night, for he dismissed them as being no more than something that *gulls him with intelligence*; in other words, Raleigh was being deceived by the information he received, or so Oxford believed.

The evidence supporting Raleigh as the rival poet is impossible to deny. Every line focuses upon this man, either through his activities, his poetry, his possessions, or his known character. In each instance, the descriptive passages employed by Oxford are amply supported by history.

The implications for this are shattering. The rivalry mentioned in the sonnets is about obtaining Queen Elizabeth's favour, and the competition for this was between Oxford and Raleigh, using poetry. In which case, the authorship controversy must be considered proven. The 17th Earl of Oxford was William Shakespeare. Only Oxford could, by right of protocol, address Queen Elizabeth as *you*. Shakspeare would have had to address the Queen as *your majesty* or similar. In any case, it is unimaginable that Shakspeare would have written to the Queen apologising for his silence while Raleigh enjoyed first place in her affection.

How might Shakespeare experts respond, apart from ignoring the evidence altogether? The obvious move is to draw attention to what academics are pleased to call their 'proof' that Shakspeare was Shakespeare. The reader should, however, be aware that if any such 'proof' existed, there would be no authorship question. For a proof to be valid, it must be both necessary and sufficient. Evidence

that is *necessary* for Shakspere to be Shakespeare can be proposed, but this *per se* is not enough. For evidence to be sufficient there must be no alternative explanation.

Consider the present case. If Oxford wrote the ‘rival poet’ sonnets to the Queen, then it would be *necessary* that he addressed her as *you*; that his references to her accorded with her position as Queen of England; that another poet had been writing verse addressed to her; that this poet could be reliably identified by the terms used in the sonnet; that historical records confirmed the content of the sonnets wherever possible; that there were no contradictions in the sonneteer’s verse.

It seems reasonable to conclude that these *necessary* conditions have been met. But are they also sufficient? To prove they are insufficient, it requires that an alternative rival poet be named: a person who satisfies the criteria of necessity in equal measure to that provided by Raleigh. If this proves impossible, then the evidence identifying Oxford, Raleigh and Elizabeth has been shown to be both *necessary* and *sufficient*. In short, it proves that Oxford wrote the ‘rival poet’ sonnets. In which case, he wrote the complete set of *Shake-speares Sonnets*, published by Thorpe in 1609, which were totally ignored by Will Shakspere.

Nevertheless, alternative poets have been considered for the status of ‘rival’, but because Shakspere is always thought to be the poet experiencing rivalry, the suggestions made are never more than an advocate’s fancy: unsubstantiated by sufficient evidence to withstand doubt. Christopher Marlowe is one of the more obvious candidates who has been proposed – in fact, by both sides of the authorship debate.

The basis for this belief rests almost entirely upon Sonnet 80 being either Oxford’s, or Shakspere’s response to Marlowe’s intervention in their personal and intimate relationship with the 3rd Earl of Southampton, ‘Shakespeare’s fair youth’. Before examining Sonnet 80, it must be pointed out that Marlowe was murdered in May 1593 aged 29. In the same year *Venus and Adonis* was published with its dedication by ‘Shakespeare’ to young Southampton, aged 19. That same year, Southampton was mentioned for nomination as a Knight of the Garter. This was an unprecedented honour for one so young; especially someone who had done nothing of service to the Crown to warrant this honour.

In the autumn of 1592, Southampton was included as a member of Elizabeth’s progress to Oxford University. He had become a rising star at Court, and had caught the eye of the Earl of Essex, which was to subsequently bring him into contact with his coterie. But to suppose that Southampton gave intimate time to Marlowe, with his low-class upbringing and belligerent reputation, or that he divided his affections between him and Lord Oxford, or for that matter, Shakspere, is to completely misunderstand the class structures that had been put in place in Tudor England. Projecting liberal, western, democratic values back through the centuries to 16th century England is a *faux pas*. “*The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.*” (L. P. Hartley, 1895-1972).

The little support there is for advocating Marlowe as ‘Shakespeare’s’ rival poet is found in *Hero and Leander*. It was an unfinished poem, perhaps cut short by Marlowe’s death, although it was licensed for publication in 1593, the year he died. This poem is believed to possess similar words to those found in Sonnet 80. But, there may be a problem with this. Sonnet 80 consists of 14 lines and 116 words, whereas Marlowe’s poem has 818 lines and 6319 words. Both poems also refer in part to the sea; hence, the chance of finding the same word appearing in *Hero and Leander* as appears in the sonnet is not really remarkable, since there are 109 words to choose from in Marlowe’s poem for every 2 in ‘Shakespeare’s’.

Consider, for example, when ‘Shakespeare’ writes: “*Or, being wreck’d, I am a worthless boat,*” he was referring, in metaphor, to his ship sailing on the “*broad main*” of the Queen’s benevolence, for which he

has correctly addressed her majesty as ‘You’. Contrary opinion ignores the significance of this aristocratic courtesy, and likens the phrase to Hero’s “*treasure suffered wrack*”. But the *treasure* Marlowe is referring to is Hero’s virginity, whose *wreck* she has *suffered* through Leander’s seduction. The poets are talking about unrelated matters. This is further exemplified when ‘Shakespeare’ writes: “*He of tall building and of goodly pride.*” In Marlowe’s poem, it is she, Hero, who dwells in a tall tower. As for his (her?) pride, Marlowe’s only mention of pride is when he refers to “*proud Adonis*”. Again, what is to be made of ‘Shakespeare’s’ “*saucy bark, inferior far to his*”? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of ‘saucy’ is: – **d.** Applied to a ship or boat: (a) In early use (with figurative context): Presumptuous, rashly-venturing (*obs.*). For Oxford, *his rashly-venturing ship [Edward Bonaventure], inferior far to his [Ark Raleigh]* was historically accurate. Leander, on the other hand, possessed no ship. Instead, he nightly swam across the Hellespont, guided by the lantern Hero had lit for him.

Further division between the sense of Shakespeare’s references to his rival, and Marlowe’s story of Leander’s first night in the bed of Hero are as easily made, and tedious to recount. And although it may be said that ‘Shakespeare’ was picking on some of Marlowe’s words for his own purpose, this could also be said to be true of almost anyone writing about the sea.

From all this, it can be seen how Shakespeare’s ‘Rival Poet’ has encumbered the faithful with yet another imponderable problem, which centuries of research have failed to solve. It is yet one more case of searching for non-existent records in the desolate archives of William Shakspeare’s past. To meet the challenge of this vacancy, many Shakespeare experts have attempted to fill the void by using their imagination, but with no appreciable success. In 1944, H. E. Rollins examined the candidates that had been proposed, dismissed the lot, and concluded that the ‘Rival Poet’ was a piece of fiction.

Advocates for Oxford’s authorship of the Shakespeare canon are much better placed; they now have at hand the historical evidence to solve the problem of the rival poet’s identity. It is therefore without question, that were this same historically backed evidence applicable to Shakspeare, it would be Oxford’s supporters, instead, who were faced with an insoluble problem.

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